

CONTRIBUTIONS OF GURU NANAK

Kapur Singh

DEPARTMENT OF GURU NANAK SIKH STUDIES
PANJAB UNIVERSITY
CHANDIGARH

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Prepared and presented by Bhai Sahib S. Kapur Singh, M.A. (Pb & Cantab.), Ex-I.C.S. Ex-MP, & Ex-MLA., at the Guru Nanak Birth-Quincentenary Celebration Programme held at the Panjab University Chandigarh on 18th January 1970 under the chairmanship of Justice S. Gurnam Singh, the then Chief Minister of Panjab.

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Guru Nanak Sikh Studies was initiated in 1970 in pursuance of a scheme of the Panjab Government and the University Grants Commission to setup Guru Nanak Chairs at some universities of India in commemoration of the Birth-Quincentenary of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The Panjab University was the first to establish such a department for study and research of the various aspects of the life, work and teachings of Guru Nanak, in particular; and of the Sikh religion, culture and literature, and of religious thought, in general. It was formally inaugurated in November, by Sardar Parkash Singh Badal, the then Chief Minister of Panjab.

The Department has now undertaken under the editorship of the undersigned, the preparation of a series of source-books and reference works to serve as basic tools for the scientific and systematic study of the religion and history of the Sikhs.

The first on the list is a Chronology of the Sikhs which is going to be the first-ever complete historical record of the five centuries of Sikhism in the form of an up-to-date chronological register of the main events since the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469. The work is being based on a careful and critical study of the original and secondary source material, lying scattered in India and abroad. It will attempt, thereby, a factual statement and an objective assessment of the political, social, religious, literary and cultural developments in the Indian subcontinent vis-à-vis Sikhism during the five centuries since its existence. It will also include a complete index and a comprehensive bibliography. The volumes are expected to meet a long-felt need of the students and teachers, scholars and researchers, writers and journalists, speakers and general readers of the religion, history, culture, lore and literature of the Sikhs.

The second such reference-work taken in hand is the preparation of a comprehensive and systematic index of *The Sikh Review* — the only regular, authentic and well-established scholarly journal of the Sikhs in the English language on the lines of The Index of *The Indian Antiquary* compiled by LM. Anstey.

Some new proposals for the further development of the Department have also been prepared and submitted under the Fifth Five-Year Plan. These include

the —

1. Preparation of a comprehensive survey of the historical shrines, *sangats* and *deras* of the Sikhs in and outside India;
2. Institution of post-graduate teaching in its field of study;
3. Publication of the *Panjab University Bulletin of Sikh Studies*; and the
4. Construction of Guru Nanak Bhavan to provide the Department with a proper and permanent habitation.

The Department has also started the enrolment and guidance of candidates for PhD. degree of the Panjab University under the supervision of its Professor and Head. A good number of candidates are working at present under its guidance and supervision on various subjects for the award of the PhD. degree.

The Reference Library of the Department is expanding fast and. The Panjab Government so generously sanctioned a special grant of Rs. 20,000 for its expansion. A very large number of rare and new books and back-issues of important journals have been added through this munificence.

A Series of Lectures on Sikh Studies to be given periodically by Sikh scholars in the field has also been instituted recently.

In addition, the Department has planned to publish *A Series of Papers and Monographs on Sikh Studies*. The present paper, Contributions of Guru Nanak, is the seventh in the series to be placed before the learned readers.

I am especially beholden to Padam Bhushan Shri Suraj Bhan and Professor Dr. R.C. Paul, former and present Vice-Chancellors, to the Syndicate and to the Senate of the Panjab University for having very kindly sanctioned the project and provided funds for it.

Guru Nanak Chair
Panjab University
24 January 1976.
Studies.

Harnam Singh Shan
Professor & Head of the
Deptt. of Guru Nanak Sikh

CONTRIBUTIONS OF GURU NANAK

It is well that the Panjab University is participating in the Birth-Quincentenary celebrations of Guru Nanak with such constructive zeal; for, the Panjab, Panjabi language, Panjabi culture, the history of Panjab, all owe a special debt of gratitude to Guru Nanak.

The Panjab University is, in a sense, a centre of high articulation of all these facets of Panjab, and thus its intimate relationship with Guru Nanak is obvious.

II

From amongst the prophets and founders of great of the world in general, and from amongst the Seers and sages of India in particular, the name of Guru Nanak stands out as one whose historicity and life-history are well and firmly grounded in objective and scientific evidence.

Guru Nanak was born on the 15th of April, 1469 A. D. at the place now famous as Nankana Sahib, included in Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947. He was born in a high caste Khatri family, employed in while-collar occupation. His father, Rai Kalu, was a man both of affluence and influence, being the traditional village revenue accountant of the manor, the landlord of which lived in the village called Talwandi, before it became Nankana Sahib, the Holy Birthplace of Nanak, after the birth of Guru Nanak.

At an early age he was sent to the village school where the traditional Hindu system of primary education was the rule. Stories of his precocious progress in the lessons taught are unanimous that he did not stay in the *pathshala* to complete his educational course. Likewise, when sent to a *madrasa* where the primary curriculum of Islamic system of education was imparted, he exhibited such signs of mental perspicuity that the Moslem teacher agreed it was unnecessary for him to continue his attendance of the school.

As is natural, his father had worldly ambitions for his only son and he decided that he should learn the ancestral occupation of trading in case young Nanak's mind was not inclined towards the post of the village revenue-accountant to which he would have normally succeeded after the retirement of his father, according to the public service rules of those days. The town of *Sacha Sauda*, also left then in Pakistan, commemorates the spot where young Nanak tried to

demonstrate what he understood as the high principles of trading. Instead of earning a good percentage of profit on the capital entrusted to him for investment, he gave it away as alms to feed a group of religious mendicants who had been without food for a number of days already.

The town of Sultanpur which is still left in Panjab was, during the 16th century, a flourishing trading centre on the highway road from Central Asia to the south of Hindustan, and it was also the headquarters of a principality presided over by a powerful Pathan of the Lodhi clan, Nawab Daulat Khan. This prince was no ordinary Satrap of the Lodhi Sultanate but was a powerful figure in the north of India, being a close relation of the Delhi sovereign. The history shows him as a powerful potentate of his times who had ambitions to wear the crown of sovereignty of the whole of north India at Delhi, and for this purpose he participated in a high conspiracy that resulted in the invasion of Babar and the first Battle of Panipat (1521 A.D) that led to the establishment of the Mughal empire in India. This Daulat Khan Lodhi had re-built and patronised this flourishing town of Sultanpur which marked an ancient site of a Buddhist Vihar, dating back to the 2nd century A. D. There seems to be some mysterious law of History that once a sacred place, always a sacred place, and which law also determines the resurgence of cognate traditions of culture or other human activities. In accordance with some such mysterious law this, Sultanpur became not only a flourishing town embellished with palaces, gardens, pavilions and other magnificent feudal buildings, but also became a centre of Islamic education and scholarship. At one time, Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb, the two remarkable princes of emperor Shah Jahan, representing two polarities of temperament, came to reside in Sultanpur to acquire traditional Moslem education and learning. It was this Sultanpur which was later on to become *Sultanpur Sahib*, the Holy Sultanpur, by the coming of young Nanak to take employment under the Lodhi prince, and then receiving his first revelation from God on this ancient holy spot of Buddhist spiritual practices.

The husband of the elder sister of Nanak, Nanaki, was also under the employment of the Lodhi prince at Sultanpur, and it was this Jai Ram of *Uppal Khatri* caste, who, to allay the anxieties of the father of Nanak about the future career of Nanak, offered to get him fixed up in government employment. It was under these circumstances that Nanak moved from Talwandi to Sultanpur, “after five days’ journey” as the *Janam-Sakhis* tell us; and when he reached the house of his sister after a travel of almost a hundred miles, the sister bowed down to touch the feet of her younger brother which is against the customary practice. On

Nanak's protesting that it was his prerogative and duty to touch her feet, she being the elder of the two, Nanaki replied, as the *Bhai Bala Janam-Sakhi* tells us: "This would be so if thou wert an earthly being".¹ Nanak "as appointed by the Lodhi prince as his chief store-keeper, a position of great trust and also of profit if the incumbent was inclined that way. By all accounts Nanak performed his duties diligently and to the utmost satisfaction of his prince employer. Here, when he was 19 years old, he was married to the daughter of a high caste *Khatri* of Batala, Mool Chand by name. On the spot where the wedding ceremony took place now stands a magnificent Sikh shrine.

It was here, at Sultanpur, that his two sons were born, the elder Sri Chand, in 1494 and the younger, Lakhmi Chand, in 1496. The elder, Sri Chand, was from the beginning of an austere and religious turn of mind, and later on he founded the sect of *Sikh Udasins* which sect has played a most remarkable and dynamic part in the missionary history of Sikhism during the last five hundred years. The younger son Lakhmi Chand, was a man of the world and continued the line of Nanak with descendants now holding high and respectable positions in Panjab and outside.

III

The turning point in the life of Nanak is the year 1496 when he was 27 years old. During these days, he would, while performing his official duties, pass out into subjective reveries, almost amounting to trances. On one such occasion, while weighing the official stores, he stopped dead at measure 13, which in Punjabi is *tera*, meaning also: 'I am Thine'; and went on repeating *tera tera*, while still passing out measure after measure of stores without keeping proper account. As would be the case anywhere, complaints were made to the prince about the way in which this parvenu Hindu high official under a Muslim Government was recklessly squandering the government stores.

Not many days after, while the matter of investigating into his alleged misconduct was still engaging the attention of the Lodhi prince, Nanak went, as to take his morning dip in the small river that, during days, flowed perennially by the side of the town of Sultanpur. The river, called, *Bein*, is still there but comes to life only during the rainy season or when the high mountain snows melt. It is recorded that after entering the waters of *Bein* for a dip, he stayed in the waters for full three days and was assumed as drowned and lost.

On the morning of the fourth day he came out of the waters of the river to the spot where his servant, who was to be his life-long companion, Mardana, was faithfully waiting with Nanak's clothes. The first words that he uttered on emerging from the waters are recorded. He said, "*There is no Hindu, no Musulman*". It was a fit formula for the commencement of his divine mission of reconciling the two antagonistic and warring cultures, the Aryan and the Semitic, by showing them that deeper down the two there lay a common sub-stratum of identity. Those acquainted with the doctrines and practices of Yoga know that *jalstambha samadhi* for long periods extending over days, and months, under deep waters, is a Yogic skill that can be acquired either by appropriate discipline or as a God-given skill from birth, *janamsiddhi*. There is no need to search for other explanations for the disappearance of Nanak in the mid-stream of *Bein* for full three days, in view of the established Yogic feat.

All the *Janam-Sakhis* agree that it was during this *Jalstambha samadhi* that Guru Nanak received his first revelation and his first commission to found and preach a new religion and a new way of life. Revelation is not a psychological process in the individuals mind; it is an encounter with Reality and the individual does not make a spiritual discovery through his own mental cogitation but he encounters God, and this distinction is fundamental. Henceforth Nanak becomes Gum Nanak, Nanak — the World Teacher. This encounter is described in the *Janam-Sakhis* in the following words: 'As God willed, Nanak, His devotee, was escorted to His Presence, then a cup filled with liquid of immortality was given him accompanied by the command: "Nanak, pay attention, this is cup of Holy Adoration of My Name. Drink it..... I am with thee and thee do I bless and exalt.....Go. rejoice in My Name, the Name of God, and preach to others to do the same. Let this be thy calling. ² Guru Nanak himself refers to this divine assignment with deep gratitude: "I, an unemployed minstrel, was assigned a rewarding task." ³

IV

Guru Nanak resigned his post and started on long journeys into all directions of the then civilized world to preach the religion of the Name of God.

Here the parallel between the missionary tours of Guru Nanak and almost 2000 years earlier, of Gautam, the Buddha, readily comes to mind. After staying for three months at Sarnath, when 60 disciples had gathered around him, he said to them one day: "Go now and wander for the gain of many, for the welfare of

many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain and for the welfare of gods and men".⁴ Gautam, the Buddha, himself spent the rest of his life in preaching his mission within a narrow area of the Indian sub-continent. But here the parallelism ends. Guru Nanak not only travelled throughout India and the known accessible Islamic world of his days, but also aimed at not merely preaching a religion and a way of life in a congenial cultural milieu, as Gautam, the Buddha, and his disciples did; but he primarily aimed at creating a sense of commitment between the men of religion and their socio-political problems to which point I propose to refer presently, in greater detail. Bhai Gurdas (1551-1639), called 'the St. Paul of Sikhism', describes the missionary travels of Guru Nanak as aimed at "removal of social and political imbalances of the world" *sodhan chadiya dharat lokai*.

The first journey of Guru Nanak was towards the east, aimed at covering: the important centres of Hindu religion, Kurukshetra, Panipat, Delhi, Hardwar, Varanasi, Gaya, Patna, and Assam are the and areas where the foot-marks of Guru Nanak are still revered through commemorative Gurdwaras. On his return journey, he crossed the 24 Parganas and going along the coast, he visited Cuttack and then Jagannath Puri where he met the great Chaitanya. One of the most powerful poetic revelations of Guru Nanak, called the *Arti*, which opens with the famous lines: *gagan mai thal*, was uttered here. It is on record that the father of Rabindranath Tagore, Maharishi Devendranath Tagore, was first powerfully attracted towards Sikhism on hearing this *Sabad* of Guru Nanak from an *Udasin* mendicant, thus arousing the interest of his illustrious son also in Sikhism by bringing him to Amritsar as a young boy.

After returning to Panjab, the Guru went on another long journey towards the south, and this itinerary is marked by along line of Gurdwaras marking the whole length of the Deccan Peninsula, down to Ceylon. New epigraphical and archaeological evidence discovered in the island of Ceylon itself, now confirms that Guru Nanak's visit to Ceylon was a momentous religious event thought worthy to be recorded in stone under royal orders and also devoutly remembered by generations of local folk up to this day.

His third long journey was towards the north, home of the yogis and Hindu gods. He travelled deep into the inner Himalayas, crossing Nepal and some portions of the western Tibet, reaching the legendary Kailash Mountain and the celestial Mansrover lake. It is here that he made a most explicit statement of doctrine that, 'Truth must be the basis of all religions and, further, the religion

must be socially committed'. Our Bhai Gurdas tells us that when the yogis residing at these inaccessible regions asked Guru Nanak; as to 'how did the news go in the world of the mortals', the reply of the Guru was sharp and to the point: 'The society has become rotten to its core'; and here he raised an accusing finger at these yogis, adding, 'you are the guilty ones; for, the society cannot be guided and sustained without men of high sensitivity and culture, but you who possess it have become escapees'. ⁵

The fourth journey of Guru Nanak was to the west when he travelled by sea and visited Mecca. Inside the holy sanctuary of Mecca, when doubts arose on account of his behaviour as to whether he was a Moslem or a Hindu, he was accosted with the question: "Who are you and what is the book that you carry under your arms, for it is not the Holy Quran? Tell us, please, according to this book that you carry whether the Muslim religion is true or the Hindu religion." ⁶ The reply of the Guru is not only clear but fearless. The Guru said, "O pilgrims, neither those who profess Islam nor those who profess Hinduism are superior, one to the other. It is the practice and its quality that makes one individual superior to the other in the eyes of God and not mere lip profession." ⁷

On his return journey, he passed through Tehran, Bukhara, Kurgan, Samarkand, Balakh, Kabul and Jalalabad over to Peshawar via Kheybar Pass, and passing through the place which is now marked as Gurdwara *Panja Sahib* in Pakistan. It is during this journey that he learnt of the invasion of Babar and he saw with his own eyes its terrible devastation on the population of Hindustan. Some of his most powerful and pregnant revelatory poems record his reactions to these political upheavals.

In the beginning of the year 1521, the Guru founded a new settlement at Kartarpur on the western bank of river Ravi. This holy place has now been left in Pakistan. At Kartarpur he ran an agricultural farm, a community kitchen and a community hall, to which place flocked his admirers and disciples, including those merely curious, from all corners of the country. Here, after handing over the mantle of successorship to Guru Angad, Nanak II, he passed away on September 22, 1539.

V

Prophets of religions, like other people, are in no small measure rooted in time and place. The forms in which they cast their ideas, no less than the methods that

they adopt, are largely fashioned by the habits of thought and action which prevail around them. Great minds and prophets make unique contributions of enduring value to the thought of their age, but they do not and they cannot altogether transcend the age in which they live. True, they sometimes raise new questions, but this they do also to answer those their contemporaries are asking; and the solutions which they give are pertinent to the traditional statements handed down from the past. The prophets like Guru Nanak, by being inspired by extraterrestrial sources, do not cease to belong to their age even when they are rising most above it. Thoughts and insights into the Reality do not make incongruous leaps, they rather advance to new concepts and higher planes and wider dimensions through re-interpolation of old ones.

An estimate and appraisal of Guru Nanak's teachings, therefore, is not possible without first delineating their context and background. The Muslim power had already been firmly established in India by the 16th century, and the imperial hegemony of Tughlaqs had impressed its stamp on the whole of the sub-continent. The Hindus no longer dreamt of throwing out the foreigners from their sacred soil, though a struggle for survival, the ease of survival was still much in evidence. A Muslim minority, an alien culture, and an indigestible society, from the Hindu point of View, was the central fact of the Indian scene when Guru Nanak was born.

What enabled a comparatively small foreign garrison to maintain its Supremacy over Hindustan, the Panjab and Bengal, was its religious homogeneity and the impossibility of any unanimity among the Hindus. From them the spirit of caste has, for ages, ousted the sentiments of nationality. Caste despises the caste or resents in caste the assumption of superiority. The Brahman condemns the cultivator; the cultivator resents the attitude of the Brahman; both despise the menial. Each Rajput clan deems itself the superior of any other and there never has been an Indian nation. ⁸

When Shahab-ud-din Ghouri finally defeated Prithvi Raj at Taraori, his royal neighbour, Jai Chandra, is recorded as having ordered a public holiday and state festivities in his kingdom. A contemporary account tells us the defeat of Prithvi Raj which resulted in a securer occupation of Indian soil by the Muslim invaders, was deemed as an occasion of national rejoicing by those whose turn was to come next:

In every house, thresholds were washed with butterfat, to mark the auspicious occasion and trumpets were publicly sounded to celebrate it. ⁹

This state of affairs had reduced the political condition of Hindus, the original natives of the soil, by the 15th century to such a state that:

Non-Muslims (are) the furniture and properties for the stage on which the drama of the Muslim destiny in Hindustan is played. The Hindus are.....as the passive material on which the Muslims impose their will. It is the junction of the Hindus to provide opportunities for the practice of Muslim virtue; they are never interesting in themselves, but only as converts, as capitation tax-payers or as corpses ¹⁰

VI

Arnold Toynbee, who is one of the modern prophet-historians, portrays the development and fate of every civilization and culture in terms of his Challenge and Response theory. The life and durability of a civilization or culture depends upon the type of challenges which it encounters during its span and on as to whether it can produce an adequate response to the challenge. If it does it survives and grows, and if it cannot it is defeated and it dies.

First and foremost, the religion which Guru Nanak revealed and preached must be tested on this touchstone. To meet the challenge of Muslim political and cultural onslaught from the 11th century onwards, into the north of India and then enveloping the whole of India, evoked three responses. One was physical resistance which though brave and stout, eventually collapsed. The second response was of a negative character through which the Hindus evolved a form of conservative seclusion of Hinduism by a rigid imposition of rules of caste and ceremonials of religion. Throughout the middle ages, the Hindus shut themselves off in their castles of caste-regulations, expecting that these restrictive limitations might stop the flood-gates of whole-sale conversion of Islam. This they, indeed, did but not without heavy losses: for, once a Hindu was found guilty of the slightest violation of the most rigid caste-laws of exclusion, he would be lost to the Hindu Community for ever. "For the immovable castles behind which the Hindus sheltered had only exit but no entrance". ¹¹ The third type of response evolved was by the emergence of saints throughout India who attempted to construct on the basis of identities rather than differences in the Muslim und Hindu cultures, a bridge of understanding between the contending parties. Ramanand, Kabir,

Chaitanya, pointed out the basic identity of *Alla* and *Ram*, stressing on piety of heart and sincere devotion as the only valid means of salvation for Hindus and Muslims alike. But, as the keen students of Indian History know, the impact of this attempt has never been very significant except in the domain of abstract religious thought, and its practical influence was confined to small fraternities so widely scattered over the Country as completely unable to play any dynamic role in the history of India. The tragic fate that overtook the cultured prince, Dara Shikoh, at the hands of bigot Aurangzeb, is truly illustrative of the eventual destiny of such a resistance to the type of challenge which the Hindus had to face.

It was, therefore, that a new and truly effective response had to be fashioned, and by this test one must judge the contribution of Guru Nanak. This is no occasion for going into the matter in detail and only a very brief and curt statement of the subject is, therefore permissible. Guru Nanak evoked a response which was perfected and implemented by the successor Nanaks and the Sikh community, consisting of basic and fundamental ideas all of which originate from the teachings of Guru Nanak. The first and the natural response to aggression, that of resistance, stout resistance, which had collapsed in the case of Hindus, was revived and taken up, fortified by a re-generation of its spiritual foundations. In his hymns, called *Babar-Vani*, Guru Nanak succinctly adumbrates two new concepts that must form the basis of human response to a given situation. The first is that the evil, unless resisted, grows and endures and does not wither away or die by itself. That is true, at least, for all practical purposes. The evil, therefore, must be resisted by human effort and destroyed 'with the help of God'. But the evil must not be left alone till God on High chooses to intervene to destroy it. The temper of the doctrine of *avtarvad*, which forms the bedrock foundation of Hindu outlook, is essentially this that evil either is destroyed by its own suicidal nature or else it must be destroyed by the direct intervention of extra-terrestrial powers: *yada yadahi dharma sayā gilanir bhavati,..sambhavami yuge yuge....* as the Bhagvadgita puts it.

It is this temper of messianic expectation which was replaced by a temper of positive human concern and responsibility that ultimately shaped the type of response which Sikhism furnished to the onslaught of Islam. The heart-tending cry and the audacious question of Guru Nanak put to God on witnessing the misery caused by Babar to undefended and unarmed civilians of India, carries clearly the seeds of this new concept of individual, personal and human responsibility of a man to be directly concerned with evil on this earth and to resist it instead of either remaining unconcerned and high and dry about it, or

hoping for extraterrestrial intervention to destroy it: “So much misery and so much anguish caused to the people, and their lamentations You saw and heard, all of them; and yet You, O, God, were neither moved nor did you intervene”, is the central cry and question of the *Babar Vani*. It was this conceptual seed which changed the entire attitude of the Sikh community to the onslaught of Islam in India.

...after centuries of subjection, Nanak was the first among the Hindus to raise his voice against tyranny and oppression. ¹²

Sikhism concedes the doctrine of *Thrasymachus* ¹³ that successful violence if it is violent enough and successful enough, does pay and may win for its practitioners all the powers and glories of the world. Sikhism enjoins, therefore, active and armed resistance to such a violence at all stages. Sikhism also shows awareness of the further teachings of *Thrasymachus* that successful violence can always clothe itself in the trappings of morality; and it, therefore, does not agree in allowing it an unhindered course. In this manner, Guru Nanak comingled the first response that of physical resistance, and the third response, that of discovering common ground of identity between the conflicting cultures of Hinduism and Islam, and fashioned the fourth response which proved historically effective.

Arnold Toynbee observes about this clash of Hindu and Muslim cultures, that:

Their principal meeting ground has been Indi where Islam has impinged on Hinduism violently. On the whole, the story of the relations between these two great religions on Indian ground has been an unhappy tale of mutual misunderstanding and hostility...The Sikh religion might be described, not inaccurately, as a vision of the Hindu-Muslim common ground. To have discovered and embraced the deep harmony underlying the historic Hindu-Muslim discord, has been a noble spiritual triumph; and Sikhs may well be proud of their new religious ethos and origin. ¹⁴

This estimate of the contribution of Guru Nanak to the solution of the fundamental problem of his times is supported by modern Hindu judgment also as —

He (Guru Nanak) cut himself adrift from all associations with the prevailing sectarian religions; and although his approach his approach to God

was through love and devotion, he did not adopt the imagery or symbolism of Vaishnavism or any other creed. His was the first and also the last successful attempt together the Hindus and Muslims in a common fold of spiritual and social brotherhood...The political achievements of Sikhism...have largely overshadowed its spiritual character, but it is this latter aspect alone with which the name of Nanak must be associated. ¹⁵

VII

The other element in the basic attitude which Guru Nanak fashioned was a re-interpretation of the age-old Hindu doctrine of non-involvement with the world as the only proper attitude for a cultured man, *nishkamkarama*. The doctrine of *nishkamkarama* is pivotal in the *Bhagvadgita* ¹⁶ and the term, *nishkamkarama*, is not only retained but upheld in the revolutionary poems of Guru Nanak and the successor Nanaks. ¹⁷ But the term has been re-interpreted to mean a passionate and full-blooded response to a given challenge and situation not surrendering before it one's inner poise. The question of Guru Nanak in the *Babar Vani*, addressed to God Almighty, *tai ki dard na aiya*, means just what Chekov makes his hero, Gromov, say in Ward No. 6 :

I react to pain with tears and cries, to baseness with indignation, to vileness with disgust and that, in my opinion, is life!...to despise the suffering would be tantamount to despising life itself, for man's whole existence consists of sensations of cold, mortification, loss and a Hamlet-like fear of death. ¹⁸

Thus the entire Hindu character of those who accepted Guru Nanak, was transformed into a new type, through re-interpretation of certain fundamental insights of the Hindu race into things and reality, but without altogether destroying or replacing those insights. Incidentally, thus was also answered the most formidable criticism against Hinduism recently made by Albert Schweitzer that Hinduism was a religion of cerebration which thinks but never does or feel anything.

Secondly, Guru Nanak, through his teachings, laid firm foundations for a democratic society by repudiating caste and social privileges by birth. Many seers and saints of India before Guru Nanak had preached irrelevance of caste to spiritual attainment; but none before Guru Nanak had repudiated the caste on its social and political plane. Guru Nanak did it and laid firm foundations for a

modern democratic society.

His third contribution was with regard to social and spiritual status of women. Claim is frequently made by the advocates that it accords a most enviable status to women in society. While it is true that the precepts of Mohammad vastly improved the status of woman as it obtained in pre-Islamic Arabia, it cannot be claimed that Koran grants women equality before law or equality of opportunity which is the essence of equality of status in the World. *“Men have mastery over women”* - is the basic refrain of Koran on the subject of women as determined by God. In our own culture, Hinduism, woman has been treated with a great deal of respect and romantic sentimentality; but it will not be claimed by any serious student of Hinduism that equality between man and woman, in the modern sense, is a postulate of Hinduism. In *Rig Veda* itself, we have a dialogue hymn¹⁹ in which mortal *Pururvas* tries but fails to persuade nymph *Urvashi* to continue to live with him, but the lure of paradise is too much for the fickle minded female. This Vedic hymn contains the following parting words of *Urvashi* to her lover:

Puruvas, don't die, don't perish' let not the cruel wolves devour you. The friendship of women is never firm. For, they are hyenas in heart.

That women are congenitally inferior to men is a Vedic postulate. In *Manavadkarmsastra*, women are referred to with much tenderness and reverence : *yatra bharya pujante ramnatra tatra devatah*; but in the operative context of this ancient Code, a woman's status has been laid down as that of a triple and eternal subordination to man, just as in Chinese Confucian culture the identical concept, *Tam Tong*, indicates, which means : 'Three Woman's Subordinations.' According to it, in a patrilineal society woman must remain subordinate to her father before her marriage, to her husband after her marriage and to her sons when widow. In the Buddhist estimation, the status of woman undergoes no improvement:

*“How Lord, are we to conduct ourselves with regard to womankind?”
“Don't see them, Ananda.” “But see them, what are we to do?” “Abstain from speech” “But if they should speak to us, what are we to do?” “Keep wide awake”. When Ananda won from the Master the right of women to enter Samgha, the Buddha remarked: “If, Ananda, the women had not received the right to enter the Order, the good religion would have fasted long, the pure law would have stood for a thousand years. But.....now it will stand fast only for 500 years.”²⁰*

It was Guru Nanak who, for the first time in the history of India and for the first time in the history of the world, perceived that there can be no enduring democratic culture unless grounded in unreserved recognition of full equality of woman with man. Just as in Greek society and Roman civilization, similarly in Islamic culture it was the inferior status of woman which remained the basic weakness of those cultures. Likewise, in Hindu society the weakest link in its social structure was the unequal status of woman, and this weakness Guru Nanak removed by putting a simple question implicating the fundamental postulate of equality of man and woman:

*Why call her, in anyway whatsoever, inferior to man when all forms of greatness of man have their matrix in woman?*²¹

VIII

Such were the contributions of Guru Nanak whose Quincentenary we are formally celebrating today.

This was the man whose teachings gave birth to a religion which according to Elliot

*is of special interest since it has created not only a political society but also customs so distinctive that those who profess it rank...as a separate race.*²²

By his teachings, he not only created a political nation, but as a by-product, for the first time in the History of India, the word 'Panjab' emerges as the name of a separate political region. Before Guru Nanak, the word 'Panjab' is mentioned nowhere in any written record of the world. This 'Panjab', within a little more than a century after him, had its political frontiers extended, from Peshawar Panipat and from Gilgit to Spiti.

Along with it, a new full-fledged language, called Panjabi, assumed a literary status which in the matter of artistic excellence and lexicographic resources, is second to no other Indo-Aryan language.

For the first time in the recorded history of India, the natural direction of invasions and immigrations was reversed from south-east to north-west, instead of from north-west to south-east; and in the 19th century, in the streets of Kabul

and Ghazni, the war-cries of *Sat Sri Akal* were heard as a token proclamation of this reversal; and the sandal-wood gates of the Holy Somnath, plundered by Mahmood of Ghazni in the 11th century, were retrieved from Ghazni in 1846 and restored to the temple Somnath.

Lastly, a new human type has been evolved about which Arnold Toynbee says to the effect that

If human race survives its follies at all,...Sikhs shall surely be there on this planet as a vigorous, hardy and go-getting homosapiens. ²³

Along with you, the distinguished gathering in this hall, I salute Guru Nanak!

1. *Janam-Sakhi Bhai Bala*, Gulab Singh & Sons, Lahore, 1918, p. 42.
2. *Puratan Janam Sakhi*, Punjab Government, Lahore, pp. 16-17.
3. *haun dhadi vekar kare laiya* — Guru Granth Sahib, Majh, p. 150.
4. *bahujanhitaya bahunsukhaya lokanukampaya athaya hitaya sukhaya devomannusanam* — *Ittivyuttkam*, 84.
5. *Phir pucchan sidh Nanak ! ‘matlok vic kiya vartara’ ?*
Babe kahiya nathji, ‘sac candrama kur andhara
Sidh chap baithe parbtin, kaun jagat kau par utara’?
— *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, Var no. 29.
6. *Vada sang vartaia, lakh na sakke kudret koi*
Pucchan khohl kitab nu, ‘Hindu vada ki Musalmano’?
— *Varan Bhai Gurdas*, Var no. 33.
7. *Baba Akkhe hajiya, subh amlan bajhon doven roi* — *Ibid*, Var no. 33
8. *Cambridge Shorter History of India*, by J. Allen et.al., New Delhi, 1969, p. 240.
9. *grihe grihe ghriteno dumbarakshalan mardham turya pravvate.* — *cf. Jai Chandraprabandha*, in *Puratan Prabandha samgraha*.
10. Hardy, Prof P., *Historians of Medieval India*, London, p. 114.
11. Majumdar, Dr. R.C., *The Sikh Review*, Calcutta, Vol. XVIII, no. 195, p. 170.
12. Narang, Dr. Gokul Chand, *Transformation of Sikhism, Lahore, — 1912*, p. 40, fn.
13. *Plato, Republic, Ch, III.*
14. Preface to *Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs*, UNESCO, London — 1960, pp. 9-10.
15. *History & Culture of the Indian People*, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay,

1960, Vol. VI, p. 569.

- 16.** *tyaktva karamphalasangam nityatripo nirashayah* — IV. 20.
- 17.** **i.** *jaise jal mahi kamal niralamu, murgai naisane.* — *Sidhgost*, p. 938.
ii. *karam karat hovai nihkaram.* — *Sukhmani*, Nanak, V, p. 274.
- 18.** Chekov, A.P., *Short Novels and Stories* (English tr. by Litvinow), Moscow, pp. 187-88.
- 19.** See X — 95, 15.
- 20.** See *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, V. 23.
- 21.** *so kiu manda akhiai, jit jammahi rajan?* — *Var Asa*, 19.
- 22.** Elliot, Sir Charles, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, London — 1921, pt, II, p 217.
- 23.** In his *East and West*, London — 1962.

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Foreword by Chief Justice Mr. Hidayutullah and *Preface* by B.R. Dr. C.D. Deshmukh.

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